

# Early County News

By Maynard Eaton (Georgia Online News Service)  
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Georgia's Second District Congressman Sanford Bishop, who finds himself in the eye of the peanut industry's salmonella storm, has reportedly blossomed into a "go-to" guy after eight terms in Congress. "I've seen his transformation into being a statesman and the person who knows the ins and outs of the political process," says veteran state Rep. Calvin Smyre (D-Columbus), the Georgia House Democratic Caucus chairman. "He has a keen intellect and he's a realist." Bishop and Republican Jack Kingston are the two members of the Georgia Congressional delegation on the House Appropriations Committee; a coveted and politically potent appointment. The conservative middle and southwest Georgia Democrat was also said to be on the short list of candidates to be appointed Secretary of Agriculture by President Obama.

"I think it would have been an opportunity to help a lot of people," says the debonair Bishop during an exclusive interview with Georgia Online News Service. "The Department of Agriculture is pivotal in nutrition, in conservation, in energy and those things are very pivotal to our folks."

Bishop is "coming up. He's moving in the direction of being a major political player in Congress," says Dr. Bob Holmes, former state representative and former editor of The Georgia Legislative Review and the Status of Black Atlanta. "Because his Second District is but 52 to 53 percent black, he walks a political tightrope. That's what counts for him being more conservative than most African-American legislators. So he has to play that game in order be a position to help."

The constituents who most need Bishop's help now are peanut farmers. His district grows more peanuts than any other Congressional district in the country. As a result, the salmonella scare has had a horrific impact on the peanut industry and hundreds of the voters he represents.

"You have a company that makes less than one percent of the peanut butter on the market that did something crazy, which potentially will have a devastating impact on the entire industry," says Bishop, who was in Atlanta to address the Georgia Legislative Black Caucus' annual Heritage Dinner fundraiser. "Hopefully that's not the case because a jar of peanut butter is safe and it has been certified to be safe, but many people are concerned nevertheless."

Bishop admits that people all over the country are rightfully incensed but says there is legislation on the state level for improved food safety precautions to make sure that if there is a positive finding of salmonella it is reported to regulators promptly. There is also legislation pending that will really tighten up the whole food safety inspection process by separating the food safety functions from the FDA. It's going to be "policed," Bishop promises.

"It's not the farmers' (fault)," Bishop laments. "They are in a quandary now — how much to plant, whether to plant and put that in the context of the economic crisis and it amounts to a terrible situation that we have to face. The industry has pulled together and it is not going to go down because of one bad actor."

But Bishop says what people and politicians want to hear about most these days is the stimulus package and what it will mean for the Georgia budget, cities and taxpayers. Because of his Appropriations Committee position, Bishop finds himself in a key role. He conservatively estimates Georgia will receive \$5 billion or more. The interest in the stimulus package is so intense that the Legislative Black Caucus speech was his third that day.

"I believe we have taken the first step toward stimulating the economy, creating jobs, investing in our future and our energy independence with renewable clean green energy," says the so-called "Blue Dog Democrat," a term referring to fiscal conservatism. "I think that the \$787 billion package will go a long way toward creating those jobs; to create the economic activity and the investments in our infrastructure that have been neglected for so long which in turn will give us a lease on the future."

Bishop's future also appears promising. During the black caucus festivities he was urged by WSB-TV anchor Monica Pearson to run for governor. The idea was warmly received by the 600-member audience.

His longevity and seniority has also seemingly cemented his clout in Washington. He's highly thought of by his white and black constituents and he represents Fort Benning, one of the largest and most important training installations for the military.

"He was obviously a strong supporter of the President, and we don't have a lot of folks in the Georgia delegation that are strong in terms of their support for the President," says William Cannon III, chairman of the Economic Justice Coalition for the People's Agenda. "When it comes to getting the president's ear, he's got to be one of the closest that can talk to him and help facilitate the funds that we need funneled to the state of Georgia."

Bishop admits that he is enjoying this political season because there is "absolutely" a decidedly different atmosphere in Washington.

"There is a lot of excitement," he beams. "There is an era of change. We're very busy. It's amazing and it's historic that we were able to do in three weeks what couldn't be done in eight years."